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NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Technical session

Addendum

Coping with drought in southern Africa

Summary of presentation by Ms. Derrina Mukupo, Nutritionist, Zambia

1. The drought that affected more than 20 million people in the countries of southern Africa from 1991 to 1993 was the worst in living memory. Despite endemic poverty, conflict and extensive environmental degradation throughout much of the region, massive starvation and death were, however, avoided. The credit for this goes mainly to the families and communities that still maintain the African tradition of strong family and kinship ties and understand the value of mutual support and sharing. The contribution of national Governments, and particularly their unprecedented levels of collaboration and coordination on a regional basis, provided vital support to the affected communities.

2. In a drought situation, children suffer first from the lack of food and succumb to the effects of malnutrition. Rural households are the most affected and in southern Africa, the vast majority of small-scale agricultural production is done by women. Therefore during the drought of 1991-1993, it was the women, and the children dependent upon them, who had the most to lose. In female-headed households, women found themselves struggling to combine their roles as mothers and providers with the additional survival tasks of foraging for food, searching for water, seeking employment for food or cash, and trying to find time to take their children to the supplementary feeding sites.

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3. Among the coping strategies employed at household level, the most significant was that of family members supporting each other and helping friends and neighbours. In addition, families diversified their incomes through enrolling in food or cash for work programmes. Only when the situation became absolutely impossible did families resort to selling off their livestock or other assets. They understood the need to protect these as long as possible as they would be crucial for recovery when the drought was over. Ultimately, when all else failed, families migrated to other areas or to special camps where water was available and food aid distributed. Among the more "modern" coping strategies employed by many mothers was immunization and use of oral rehydration salts to reduce the vulnerability of their children.

4. At the level of national Governments, vulnerable groups were identified and targeted for the provision of food aid and supplementary feeding for children. Labour-intensive public works programmes and community-oriented food and cash for work schemes, as well as agricultural grants, subsidies and input, were provided.

5. A key element in the success of national drought management programmes was the unprecedented level of collaboration and coordination in the region between the member States of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). From early warning systems, through a consolidated international appeal for aid, to joint transport and logistics operations, it was a model of how such regional cooperation can be effective.

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Addendum

Women: their vulnerability and strengths in the face of disaster

Summary of presentation by Ms. Rokeya Kabir, Executive Director, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha

1. The presentation looks at the vulnerability and strengths of Bangladeshi women in the face of disaster, especially the recurring cyclone hazard. Cyclones are inevitable in Bangladesh owing to its geographic and climatic characteristics. The extent of poverty, ill health, and overcrowding throughout the country makes most of the population extremely vulnerable to such disasters. The poor health and nutritional status of children and their mothers places these groups especially at risk. This overall vulnerability is exacerbated by lack of educational opportunities and by widespread cultural, social and economic discrimination against women.

2. When cyclones hit, women are further disadvantaged by social custom and purdah which can make it hard for them to take refuge in communal shelters. When shelters are far away, women, children, the sick and the elderly have trouble reaching them as they are physically weaker and women in addition are responsible for taking care of the children. In the aftermath of a cyclone, the presence of human and animal corpses, lack of clean drinking water and latrines and overcrowded conditions in shelters all lead to outbreaks of disease. These epidemics usually account for more deaths than the cyclone itself. Children and women succumb first due to their poor health and nutritional status.

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3. Bangladeshi women, however, are not helpless victims, as so often portrayed. They are able to substantially reduce their vulnerability and that of their children through their own strength, courage and determination. Using their ingenuity, they manage to survive and, when allowed to, have a major role to play in the planning and implementation of recovery and rehabilitation programmes. Their contribution to household income frequently keeps the family alive.

4. Because of women's participation, health programmes, such as oral rehydration therapy and the expanded programme of immunization and special measles vaccination campaigns, are able to minimize infant and child mortality in the wake of a cyclone. Solidarity among women and community support in general are also key factors in reducing vulnerability.

5. The objective of examining the special vulnerability of women and children and the crucial role that women can, and do, play in reducing that vulnerability, is that future development programmes will not only incorporate disaster management measures as a fundamental element but also recognize and enhance women's special strengths. In this way, the empowerment of women so as to enable them to fully develop their potential will become an integral part of disaster preparedness and mitigation. This will help to further reduce the unnecessary suffering and death of children as a result of natural disasters.

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Addendum

Community and disasters in Latin America: action strategies

Summary of the submission by Mr. Andrew Maskrey, Intermediate Technology Development Group, Peru

1. The main argument of this document is that the disaster prevention and management models now used in Latin America have basic conceptual and methodological flaws. The models are based on formal experience of vulnerability and disasters from which a set of conventional instruments on disaster prevention and reduction are derived.

2. Our theory is that, because of the economic and spatial developments that have occurred in Latin America in the last 20 years, local experience of vulnerability is changing and becoming increasingly heterogeneous. Consequently, there is a split between the formal experience on which outside intervention is based and the local, but real, experiences of the population. This split leads to the rejection or failure of many of the disaster prevention and reduction programmes in the region.

3. It is being recommended that disaster prevention and management programmes should be redesigned on the basis of real experiences of vulnerability and that flexible action strategies suited to local conditions should be adopted. The implementation of such strategies means that far-reaching changes in the institutional framework for disaster prevention and management in the region will be required to make it more decentralized, people-oriented and practical.

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